

*Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication,  
the Crowd, and a Monstrous Illusion*

Antony Aumann

One thing that continues to attract people to Kierkegaard's writings is his inexhaustible literary creativity. Unlike many thinkers, he does not express his philosophical insights in straightforward academic prose. He delivers them to us under pseudonyms, through narratives, and in an ironic or humorous style. Even in his seemingly straightforward works, we find trickery and "profound deception."<sup>1</sup>

Part of what makes Kierkegaard's literary style of philosophical interest is the theory that lies behind it, his so-called "theory of indirect communication." The most exciting and provocative aspect of the theory concerns the alleged importance of indirect communication. In several places throughout Kierkegaard's writings we find the claim that there are some ends only indirect communication can accomplish – a claim not meant to entail the guaranteed success of indirect communication, only its ability to do what direct communication cannot. For example, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* the pseudonym Johannes Climacus claims that any attempt to communicate subjectivity or inwardness must make use of an indirect form (CUP, 1:79, 242, 325). In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard himself argues that an "illusion" can only be removed through indirect communication (PV, 43, 54). And in *Works of Love* he maintains that indirect communication is necessary for helping a loved one achieve what is most beneficial for him or her (WL, 274). Finally, in *Practice in Christianity*, the pseudonym Anti-Climacus argues that it is impossible for Christ to save all of humanity without employing indirect communication

---

<sup>1</sup>George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 21. See also Pattison, "The Theory and Practice of Language and Communication in Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses," *Kierkegaardiana* 19 (1998): 85-87.

(PC, 94, 123-44).<sup>2</sup> I will call the general claim contained in these passages “the indispensability thesis.”

Several commentators have objected that Kierkegaard’s acceptance of the indispensability thesis is not rationally justified. C. Stephen Evans, for example, claims that Kierkegaard simply exaggerates the need for indirect communication.<sup>3</sup> Harry Broudy questions whether the failure of direct communication is really as inevitable as Kierkegaard makes it sound.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Walter Lowrie goes so far as to suggest that Kierkegaard resorts to indirect communication simply because of his deep, personal melancholy.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to take a close, analytic look at Kierkegaard’s justification of the indispensability thesis. To this end, I will carefully reconstruct two of the main arguments he offers in defense of it, both of which take their departure from *The Point of View*. The first is that he needs to use indirect communication to discourage people from losing themselves in the “crowd.” The second is that he needs to use indirect communication to help people out of a “monstrous illusion.” I do not pretend that these two arguments exhaust everything Kierkegaard has to say in defense of the indispensability thesis. We certainly find in his writings other interesting reasons why he needs to use indirect communication for other important purposes. Investigating these reasons would be worthwhile. Nevertheless, the two arguments I have mentioned are intriguing in their own right and, I think, can be understood in isolation. They will be the sole focus of my paper.

---

<sup>2</sup>It is worth noting that we sometimes find weaker claims in Kierkegaard’s writings concerning the importance of indirect communication. E.g., in *Stages on Life’s Way* the pseudonymous Quidam suggests that indirect communication is the best way – but not necessarily the only way – to prevent someone from becoming a thoughtless follower (SLW, 344).

<sup>3</sup>C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s “Fragments” and “Postscript”: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Amherst NY: Humanity Books, 1983) 111-12.

<sup>4</sup>Harry S. Broudy, “Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 59/9 (1961): 230. See also Vanessa Rumble, “To Be as No-One: Kierkegaard and Climacus on the Art of Indirect Communication,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 3/2 (1995): 311, 313-14.

<sup>5</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse Which Accompanied It*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964) 96n1.

My conclusion regarding these two arguments will be moderate in nature. On the one hand, they establish that indirect communication is *useful* for the stated purposes and indeed much more so than direct communication. Therefore, it is wrong to say that Kierkegaard resorts to it simply because of his deep, personal melancholy. On the other hand, the arguments do not establish that indirect communication is *necessary* for the stated purposes or that it is the *only* mechanism for accomplishing them. Therefore, the arguments do not support the indispensability thesis and the charge of exaggeration has some merit.

### *Kierkegaard's Two Notions of Indirect Communication*

Before turning to the arguments for the indispensability thesis, we must address a preliminary question: what does Kierkegaard mean by the term "indirect communication"? The unfortunate truth is that it is not altogether clear. Kierkegaard never provides us with a coherent definition, only a number of disjointed discussions of the topic.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, I believe that we can organize his comments in a productive manner. In this section I will attempt to do so.

My account will pull from a variety of Kierkegaard's writings, both pseudonymous and signed. This begs the notorious question regarding how to treat the pseudonymous texts. Kierkegaard famously requests that we not attribute to him the views found in them (CUP, 1:[627]). I will adopt the following response to this request. We must distinguish between two notions of attribution. On the one hand, to attribute a view to me can simply mean that I came

<sup>6</sup>This fact has led some to claim that Kierkegaard does not have a coherent theory of indirect communication. See Benjamin Daise, *Kierkegaard's Socratic Art* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1999) 30; and Poul Lübcke, "Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication," *History of European Ideas* 12/1 (1990): 32. It has led others to claim that the phrase "indirect communication" is an honorific term, one that refers to any kind of communication that Kierkegaard deems important. See Lars Bejerholm, *Meddelelsens Dialektik: Studier i Søren Kierkegaards Teorier om Språk, Kommunikation och Pseudonymitet* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962) 208-209, 311. Part of the problem here is that Kierkegaard has hesitations about communicating directly about indirect communication. For a discussion of this issue, see Antony Aumann, "Kierkegaard on the Need for Indirect Communication" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2008) 25-29.

up with it. This is a matter of giving me credit for an original idea or an original way of putting an idea. On the other hand, to attribute a view to me can involve the further claim that I actually believe it. This is a matter of identifying where I stand on a particular issue. Notice that it is possible to make the former kind of attribution without making the latter. For example, I can attribute to my colleague a powerful way of presenting a position that I am not sure he or she ultimately believes. This is the attitude I will take up regarding Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts. I will assert that Kierkegaard came up with the views found in them but deny that they necessarily represent his own opinions.<sup>7</sup>

Some people might object that projects such as mine suffer from a special, heightened version of the problem posed by the pseudonyms. I aim to develop a Kierkegaardian theory by pulling from a number of different pseudonymous texts. This practice, some might say, is akin to piecing together words from the mouths of so many characters in Shakespeare's plays. It does violence to the differences between the worldviews that the various characters occupy; it homogenizes what is in fact heterogeneous.

While I concede there is a *potential* problem here, I fail to see why it *necessarily* arises. Kierkegaard's pseudonyms do indeed occupy different lifeviews. However, we cannot say *a priori* that these lifeviews are incommensurable on every point. It is possible at least in principle that they agree on some topics. To settle the matter, we must do the difficult work of digging through the texts, finding the positions articulated by the different pseudonyms, and examining whether they fit together. If we find a coherent view, then the practice of piecing together passages from different pseudonymous texts is legitimate. If we find incoherence and contradiction, then it is not. As for the case in point, I believe that when we do the requisite work with respect to the topic of indirect communication we find a coherent set of views. The following is my account of those views.

There are basically two ways in which Kierkegaard talks about

<sup>7</sup>I am not alone in taking up this response to Kierkegaard's request. For others who adopt it or something like it, see Steven M. Emmanuel, "Reading Kierkegaard," *Philosophy Today* 36/3 (1992): 241; Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 8-10; and Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) 15.

indirect communication. On his first way of talking about the term, "indirect communication" refers roughly to Socrates' midwifery or *maieutic* method.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, Kierkegaard does not identify the midwifery method with the Socratic *elenchus*, the specific practice of engaging in an adversarial dialogue with someone by asking questions about the person's beliefs.<sup>9</sup> He identifies it instead with the more general pedagogical strategy that the *elenchus* instantiates. The defining feature of this general strategy is that the teacher does not explicitly tell the learners the truth but rather helps them discover or "give birth" to it for themselves (PF, 10-13). To use Kierkegaard's terminology, the midwife helps other people "stand alone" in the learning process (JP, 1:650, section 15; cf. WL, 275). In contemporary parlance we might say that the midwife promotes active learning or discovery learning.

The difficulty here concerns precisely how to understand the process by which the teacher encourages discovery learning. Under what conditions does Kierkegaard think it occurs? That is to say, under what conditions does he think that the teacher successfully engages in indirect communication in this first sense?

The secondary literature contains a diversity of views on this matter. Far and away the dominant approach is to describe the relevant conditions in terms of the degree to which the learner is active in the pedagogical process. Among the scholars who adopt this approach there are two camps. Members of the first camp say that indirect communication occurs whenever the learner is active *at all* in the pedagogical process.<sup>10</sup> The threshold here is obviously quite

<sup>8</sup>See JP 1:109; JP 1:653, section 24; JP 6:6783; CUP, 1:277; OMWA, 7. For Socrates' account of himself as a spiritual midwife, see Plato, *Theaetetus* 149a-b, 150a-d. For discussions of the connection between indirect communication and the *maieutic* method, see Daise, *Kierkegaard's Socratic Art*, 14-36; Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 9-11, 102-105; John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 45-46, 135-46; Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) 284; and Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette IN: Purdue University Press, 1996) 60-64.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the *elenchus*, see Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79/11 (1982): 711-14.

<sup>10</sup>George Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 24; Nerina Jansen, "Deception in Service of the Truth:

low. After all, even the most passive kind of learning requires some amount of uptake on the part of the learner. As a consequence, those who take this approach tend to categorize all or almost all communication as indirect communication.

Commentators who belong to the second camp of interpretation find this consequence unacceptable. They point out that neither Kierkegaard nor any of the pseudonyms state that all or almost all communication is indirect communication. In fact, Johannes Climacus suggests that direct communication is the norm (CUP, 1:74). Members of the second camp conclude that there must be restrictions on the kind of activity on the part of the learner that counts. In particular, they maintain that indirect communication occurs only if the learner actively reflects on the implications and ramifications for his or her own life of the knowledge he or she acquires. In other words, it occurs only if the teacher prompts the learner to engage in what Climacus calls subjective thinking or subjective reflection (see CUP, 1:73-76, 192-203).<sup>11</sup>

This restriction, however, strikes me as somewhat ad-hoc. I see no obvious reason why *this particular kind* of activity matters while other kinds do not.<sup>12</sup> I grant that Kierkegaard almost always talks

---

Magister Kierkegaard and the Problem of Communication" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1997) 125; Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, 294; Edward F. Mooney, "Kierkegaard, Inwardness, and Belief: Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1997) 134; George Pattison, "'Who' Is the Discourse? A Study in Kierkegaard's Religious Literature," *Kierkegaardiana* 16 (1993): 43; and Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 181-83.

<sup>11</sup>Broudy, "Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication," 227; Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* 7, 97; David Lochhead, "Comment to H. A. Nielsen's 'Two Levels of Indirect Communication: Language and "Legend" in Mark 6,' " in *Kierkegaard: Resources and Results*, ed. Alastair McKinnon (Montreal: Laurier University Press, 1982) 102; Walsh, *Living Poetically*, 10-11; and Westphal, *Becoming a Self*, 64.

<sup>12</sup>Notice also that if Kierkegaard stipulates that indirect communication occurs whenever the learner engages in subjective reflection, then the case for the indispensability thesis is easily made. Perhaps too easily for our satisfaction. It

about indirect communication in situations where the learner must appropriate the content of the communication into how he or she lives his or her life. However, I believe this fact says more about Kierkegaard's specific pedagogical goals than it does about the nature of indirect communication. Such appropriation is what *Kierkegaard* wants to bring about in *his* readers by way of *his* use of indirect communication. But it is not therefore the only thing someone can bring about by way of indirect communication. Indeed, we can find passages in Kierkegaard's corpus describing cases where indirect communication does not serve this end at all (see, e.g., CUP 1:277-78).

I find it more helpful and more exegetically accurate to describe the conditions under which something counts as indirect communication (in the first sense) in terms of the degree to which the learner depends on the teacher. I submit the following definition. Indirect communication (in this first sense) occurs if and only if

- (1) the teacher provides some relevant form of guidance to the learner; but
- (2) the learner does not depend on the teacher's authority for the *justification* of the knowledge acquired or the decision made as a result of the learning process; and
- (3) the learner does not depend on the teacher for the *content* of the knowledge acquired or the decision made as a result of the learning process (i.e., the teacher does not explicitly or implicitly tell the learner what he or she is supposed to learn or decide).<sup>13</sup>

Some comments about these conditions are in order. The first condition is included in order to rule out the possibility that someone could engage in indirect communication without saying anything or even doing anything remotely communicative.<sup>14</sup> Not

follows simply by definition that indirect communication is indispensable for the task of getting the learner to engage in subjective reflection.

<sup>13</sup>This account bears some rough similarities to the one developed by Poul Lübcke. See "Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication," 31-40. Lübcke, however, focuses on the task of helping the learner make a decision and not that of helping the learner acquire knowledge. I wish to cast a wider net.

<sup>14</sup>Note that this does not necessarily rule out silence insofar as being silent in a given situation can imply certain things and thus provide the learner with some guidance.

only would this be an intuitively strange result, it is one that Climacus seems to reject in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (CUP, 1:65-66). The second condition is drawn from the early pages of *Philosophical Fragments*. There Climacus praises Socratic midwives *precisely because* they do not serve as authority figures for other human beings (PF, 10-12). This strongly suggests that not serving as an authority figure is an important part of being a midwife. The third condition comes from *Practice in Christianity*. Here Anti-Climacus states that the indirect communicator does not tell the learner exactly what the outcome of the learning process is supposed to be. Instead, the indirect communicator provides the learner with a puzzle or problem that the learner must figure out for himself or herself (PC, 133; cf. CUP, 1:242).

We can sharpen our understanding of this kind of indirect communication by looking at a paradigmatic instance of it: *Either/Or*. This book contains what amounts to a debate between two fictional characters, A and Judge William, over the merits of their respective lifeworlds. An important feature of the book is that it does not contain a conclusion to the debate (see CUP, 1:252-54). It does not end with one character acknowledging the superiority of the other's lifeworld. Nor does the fictional editor, Victor Eremita, step in to render an impartial judgment. In addition, lest readers try to learn who is supposed to win by looking to the lifeworld of the actual author, Kierkegaard publishes the book under a pseudonym. He even goes so far as to deceive the citizens of Copenhagen into thinking that he is a loafer or idler who lacks the motivation and drive necessary for writing such a book (PV, 58-63). The purpose of these tactics is to force readers to figure out for themselves which lifeworld wins and why.<sup>15</sup> In this way, conditions (2) and (3) above obtain. Nevertheless, readers are not left entirely without guidance. *Either/Or* offers a rich account of the two competing lifeworlds, one that lays bare their various drawbacks and advantages. This account enables readers to make an informed but still nonetheless independent judgment about which lifeworld is superior. Thus, condition (1) obtains as well.

So much for Kierkegaard's first way of talking about indirect

<sup>15</sup>See CUP, 1:296-97; PC, 133; Lübcke, "Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication," 36.



communication. On his second way of talking about the term, “indirect communication” refers not to a general pedagogical strategy but rather to the use of specific artful literary devices. Chief among the relevant devices is pseudonymity. However, it is not the only device on the list. Kierkegaard also includes deception, humor, irony, ambiguity, fictional narratives, and “imaginative constructions.”<sup>16</sup>

It is worth noting at this point that the distinction between this second way of talking about indirect communication and the first way often gets obscured in Kierkegaard’s writings. The reason is that Kierkegaard often uses artful literary devices when engaging in the midwifery method, as seen in the case of *Either/Or*. Nevertheless it is important to respect the difference between the two ways of talking about indirect communication. There are at least two reasons why. First, Kierkegaard sometimes categorizes the use of artful literary devices as indirect communication without regard for whether this use occurs in the service of the midwifery method. In other words, he sometimes applies the label in question to the use of artful literary devices in contexts where the midwifery method is simply not under discussion.<sup>17</sup> Second, Kierkegaard explicitly states that his upbuilding discourses do not count as indirect communication even though they are maieutic in nature. He justifies this statement by pointing out that the discourses do not exhibit the use of certain artful literary devices, in particular pseudonymity (JP, 1:656;

---

<sup>16</sup>See Evans, *Kierkegaard’s “Fragments” and “Postscript,”* 105-107; Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, 255-96; Jamie Turnbull, “Kierkegaard, Indirect Communication, and Ambiguity,” *The Heythrop Journal* 50/1 (2009): 13-22. Someone may object that Kierkegaard’s decision to use the label “indirect communication” in this context is a bit strange. It certainly does not track our pretheoretical understanding of how to use the label. For example, I am not pretheoretically inclined to call *Hamlet* indirect communication simply because it contains irony, ambiguity, fictional narratives, etc. This objection, however, is beside the point. The practice of using such artful literary devices is a recognizable and wide-spread one. In addition, as we will see, Kierkegaard claims that this practice is indispensable for his purposes. That is the claim I wish to investigate. What exactly Kierkegaard decides to call the practice of using artful literary devices—be it “indirect communication” or something else—is irrelevant as far as my project is concerned.

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion of passages in Kierkegaard’s writings where this occurs, see Aumann, “Kierkegaard on the Need for Indirect Communication,” 30-57.

6:6701).<sup>18</sup> The implication is that, at least here, he is reserving the title of “indirect communication” for writings that *do* exhibit the use of such devices. From these two pieces of evidence, I draw the conclusion that the second way of talking about indirect communication picks out a distinct way in which Kierkegaard employs the term. Hence, it requires independent treatment.

The main problem with the second way of talking is that it is difficult to develop a helpful definition of “artful literary devices.” An intensional definition is a nonstarter. Kierkegaard does not tell us what essential feature all and only artful literary devices share such that using them counts as indirect communication. Nor does it seem feasible for us to come up with a list of features on our own by abstracting away what all of the relevant devices have in common.

Another option is an extensional definition. We can say that the expression “artful literary devices” refers to those devices the use of which Kierkegaard explicitly calls indirect communication. This definition has obvious drawbacks. It does not tell us what to say about devices Kierkegaard does not discuss. Nor does it satisfy our curiosity as to why he picks out all and only the devices that he does. Nevertheless, an extensional definition does provide enough information to determine the meaning of the indispensability thesis. To wit, indirect communication (in the second sense) is indispensable if and only if there are some projects we can accomplish only by way of one of the literary devices the use of which Kierkegaard designates as indirect communication. Since analyzing the indispensability thesis is the main goal of this paper, the extensional definition provides us with what we need.

In the end, Kierkegaard says exciting and provocative things about both kinds of indirect communication. He ultimately maintains that both are indispensable for his purposes. Nevertheless, the use of pseudonyms, humor, deception, fiction, etc. is somewhat more conspicuous in his writings than the use of the midwifery

---

<sup>18</sup>George Pattison argues that Kierkegaard should not classify the upbuilding discourses in the way that he does in these passages. Even according to what I call the second way of talking about indirect communication, the upbuilding discourses fit the bill. Although they are not published under pseudonyms, they do contain other artful literary devices. See Pattison, “The Theory and Practice of Language and Communication,” 85-87; *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, 12-34.

method. In addition, he provides a more explicit defense of the indispensability of this kind of indirect communication. Therefore, this is where I will focus my attention in the rest of the paper.

### *Indirect Communication and the Crowd*

One argument that Kierkegaard sets forth regarding the need for indirect communication and that has received some mention in the secondary literature concerns a criticism Kierkegaard levels against modern society.<sup>19</sup> The criticism is that people lose themselves in the “crowd” instead of becoming “single individuals.” What this means is that they frivolously and thoughtlessly accept the judgments of others instead of carefully coming to conclusions by and for themselves (UDVS, 127-37; TA, 90-94). They lack the courage to make a decision—especially one having to do with ethics and religion—without simply deferring to public opinion on the matter.<sup>20</sup>

People fear making decisions for themselves because it opens up certain undesirable possibilities. That is to say, it brings into play certain unpleasant situations that would otherwise not be in play. Two in particular are worthy of note. First, if you make a decision for yourself, you might not end up making the same decision as other people. You therefore might not enjoy the natural *comfort* that comes with human solidarity (JP, 4:4885). Moreover, you might experience the *discomfort* of persecution or peer pressure (TSI, 120; UDVS, 136). After all, other people also want to enjoy the comfort of solidarity. If you do not share their opinion, you inhibit them from enjoying this comfort fully. Thus, they will be well-motivated to pressure you

<sup>19</sup>See Emmanuel, “Reading Kierkegaard,” 252; Evans, *Kierkegaard’s “Fragments” and “Postscript,”* 106; John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought*, 25-26, 136; Mooney, “Kierkegaard, Inwardness, and Belief,” 135-37; and George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 1999) 69-73.

<sup>20</sup>TSI, 108; JP, 3:2964; JP, 3:3229; and JP, 4:4941. For discussions of the problem of “the public,” see Pat Cutting, “The Levels of Interpersonal Relationships in Kierkegaard’s Two Ages” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1984) 78, 82; Nerina Jansen, “The Individual versus the Public: A Key to Kierkegaard’s Views of the Daily Press” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Corsair Affair*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990) 1-21.

into conforming to their views. Second, if you make decisions for yourself, you bear the responsibility for those decisions (UDVS, 132-33). Thus if you happen to decide wrongly, you will be subject to blame. The blame might come from other people. But, even more frightfully, it might come from God or from yourself in the form of the voice of conscience (UDVS, 128-29). The mere threat of such possibilities brings with it the uneasiness of anxiety.

Kierkegaard claims that people think they can avoid these undesirable possibilities by following the crowd (UDVS, 128; JP, 3:2968). They believe that if they follow the crowd, they will not have to worry about missing out on the comfort of solidarity. Nor will they have to worry about suffering the discomfort of persecution and peer pressure. Finally, they will not have to worry about the possibility of becoming blameworthy or the accompanying feeling of anxiety (UDVS, 128-29). For they believe they will be able to deflect responsibility for their decisions onto the crowd, as we see paradigmatically in the case of the person who appeals to the fact that “everyone does it” as an excuse (TSI, 107).

Kierkegaard grants that following the crowd provides a number of psychological comforts. But he denies that it enables people to avoid responsibility for their actions and beliefs. He offers two reasons for this denial. First, the crowd does not exist in and of itself. It is an abstract object like a class or a set. As such, it is identical with the individuals that comprise it. It is not some *thing* over and above them (TSI, 108; TA, 90-93). Because the crowd is not a distinct ontological entity, it cannot be responsible without the people who comprise it being responsible. Those who think they can avoid responsibility by passing the buck to the crowd overlook this point. They implicitly attribute a greater ontological status to the crowd than it actually has. They blame some *thing* that is not really there (TSI, 108; TA, 91).

Second, even if the crowd were a distinct ontological entity, the people who followed the crowd would not avoid responsibility entirely. Such people would still be responsible for their decision to go along with the crowd in the first place. For Kierkegaard maintains (perhaps too optimistically) that the pressure to follow the crowd is never entirely coercive. We are always free to go it alone. Since we can break with the crowd, we are responsible for our decision not to do so. This is in part what Kierkegaard means when he says, “How

you act and the responsibility for it is finally wholly and solely yours as an individual.”<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, following the crowd might still allow people to *ignore* the fact that they are responsible. In other words, even though following the crowd does not actually allow people to avoid responsibility, they might wrongly believe that it does. And if they hold such a belief, they will not see themselves as responsible when they follow the crowd.

This is a serious problem in Kierkegaard’s eyes. He views owning up to one’s responsibility for how one acts and what one believes as an essential part of ideal human existence. Indeed, to become “the single individual,” which he so often praises as the highest goal in life, involves *inter alia* being clearly and continually conscious of one’s responsibility as a moral and religious agent (UDVS, 127; TSI, 117; OMWA, 10). Accordingly, Kierkegaard wants to get people to see that following the crowd does *not* allow them to avoid personal responsibility. Short of that, he wants to discourage people from actually following the crowd so that they cannot use this as an evasion tactic in order to avoid acknowledging personal responsibility for their lives. Finally, as a first step in this whole process, he wants to thwart people from following *him* in particular. After all, following him would just be another token of the same problematic type as following the crowd. This final point brings us to one main purpose of Kierkegaard’s artful literary devices. They push his readers away, encouraging or even forcing them to “stand alone” (JP, 1:653, sections 23-24; SLW, 344-45).

Textual support abounds for the idea that indirect communication serves to create distance between author and reader. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments,”* Johannes Climacus suggests that the indirect communicator does not induce people to go the same way as he or she does, but rather urges them to go their own way:

Indirect communication makes communicating an art in a sense different

---

<sup>21</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956) 189. I depart from the Hong and Hong translation here for the sake of emphasis.

from what one ordinarily assumes it to be. . . . To stop a man on the street and to stand still in order to speak with him is not as difficult as having to say something to a passerby in passing, without standing still oneself or delaying the other, without wanting to induce him to go the same way, but just urging him to go his own way. (CUP, 1:277)

Elsewhere Climacus asserts that the aim of indirect communication is to set readers free (CUP, 1:74). He also says that such communication “establishes a chasmic gap between reader and author and fixes the separation of inwardness between them” (CUP, 1:263). For still further support, we can look at how Kierkegaard actually employs his artful literary devices. His use of pseudonyms, for example, inhibits readers from learning whether he himself endorses the views contained in his books. And his use of “imaginative constructions” – the thought experiments he develops in a hypothetical or subjunctive mood – achieves the same end by making it unclear whether he actually stands behind what he says.

Let us grant, then, that Kierkegaard uses indirect communication to push people away and discourage them from depending on him. The question remains: does he *need* artful literary devices for this purpose? Are such devices *indispensable* for this purpose? I doubt it. As Vanessa Rumble points out, Kierkegaard could push readers away with a straightforward or direct communication.<sup>22</sup> He could, for example, simply tell them not to depend on him. In fact, Kierkegaard follows this procedure in his signed writings. We read in the preface to each set of *Upbuilding Discourses*: “[This little book] is called ‘discourses,’ not sermons, because its author does not have authority to *preach*, ‘upbuilding discourses,’ not discourses for upbuilding, because the speaker by no means claims to be a *teacher*” (EUD, 5).<sup>23</sup> And, in the preface to *For Self-Examination*, we read: “My dear reader, read aloud, if possible. . . . By reading aloud you will gain the strongest impression that you have only yourself to consider, not me, who, after all, am ‘without authority,’ nor others, which would be a distraction” (FSE, 3; cf. JFY, 91-92). It seems likely that these straightforward requests will discourage at least *some* people from depending improperly on Kierkegaard. If so, indirect

<sup>22</sup>Rumble, “To Be as No-One,” 311, 313-14.

<sup>23</sup>See also EUD, 53, 107, 179, 231, 295.

ommunication is not the *only* way to accomplish this end.

There are two ways someone might try to rescue the idea that artful literary devices are indispensable for heading off improper dependence. First, someone might say that we have underestimated the depth of the problem. Kierkegaard worries about people who will depend on him *even though he does not want them to do so*.<sup>24</sup> Simply telling such people that he does not want them to depend on him will not make a difference (and, presumably, neither will explaining to them why they should not do so). Kierkegaard must use more drastic measures. He must actually *prevent* these people from figuring out what position he endorses in the first place.

This is an important point. But it does not rescue the idea in question. Even if we grant that Kierkegaard must hide his own position from his readers, it is unclear why doing so *requires* the use of special literary or rhetorical devices. For instance, he could say in perfectly plain language, "I do not necessarily advocate the lifestyles describe."

Second, someone might try to rescue the idea that artful literary devices are needed to head off improper dependence by raising the following objection. A straightforward attempt to push people away – e.g. simply telling people not to depend on you – seems to involve a performative contradiction. When you straightforwardly encourage someone to stand alone, you actually *discourage* that person from standing alone with respect to one particular decision, viz. the higher-order decision about whether or not to stand alone. With respect to this higher-order decision, you actually give the person a rhetorical push toward one option – which is the exact opposite of letting the person stand alone. Therefore, if you want the person to stand alone *with respect to everything*, including the higher-order decision about whether or not to stand alone, you contradict yourself by straightforwardly encouraging him or her to stand alone. And perhaps that is why someone who wants to encourage people to stand alone must turn to indirect communication (cf. CUP, 1:75).

---

<sup>24</sup>Ideally, people will not even desire to become Kierkegaard's followers and thus revealing his views will not matter. However, Kierkegaard does not write for an ideal audience. He writes for those who actually are inclined to depend on him in an inappropriate manner. The suggestion here is that accommodating the flaws of his readers requires the use of a special strategy.

We can sharpen this objection by putting it in slightly different terms. Kierkegaard wants to leave it up to his readers to decide for themselves how to live their lives. However, some of his readers might decide that they want to live their lives as Kierkegaard's followers. Their thoughtful and honest decision might be to become Kierkegaardians and do whatever he does. By straightforwardly pushing these people away, Kierkegaard discourages them from choosing this option. But that means he has not left it entirely up to them to decide how to live their lives. And thus he has not done what he wants to do.

We can deal with this objection as follows. First, it is not clear that the objection actually applies to Kierkegaard. He does not maintain that the learner should stand alone *unconditionally* or with respect to *everything*. He only maintains that the learner should stand alone with respect to ethical and religious decisions. This qualification opens up room for giving straightforward rhetorical pushes elsewhere and, in particular, with respect to the higher-order decision about whether or not to stand alone when making ethical or religious decisions. Once such room exists, the aforementioned contradiction goes away.

Someone might counter that the higher-order decision in question is *itself* an ethical or religious decision. Thus the above-mentioned qualification does not help and the objection against using direct communication returns. Under this interpretation, however, turning to indirect communication does nothing to improve matters. Hiding behind a pseudonym or writing in a subjunctive mood also encourages readers to make decisions for themselves. For it prevents them from knowing what the author believes and thus prevents them from becoming his or her followers. In this way it too favors one of the options facing the person making a higher-order decision about whether or not to stand alone. This, of course, is the same consideration that led to a performative contradiction above in the case of direct communication. Therefore, by the same reasoning, it will lead to one here in the case of indirect communication.

In summary, we have identified one purpose for which Kierkegaard uses indirect communication: encouraging people to make ethical and religious decisions for themselves. However, we have not established that indirect communication is the *only* way to accomplish this purpose. In fact, on one interpretation, it runs aground on



the same problem as direct communication. Thus, we have not proven the indispensability thesis here.

### *A Monstrous Illusion*

I suggested in the introduction that Kierkegaard offers us a second reason for turning to indirect communication (understood as the use of artful literary devices). To get at this reason, we will have to look closely at one faction of his target audience. Our inspection will reveal that this faction suffers from a very peculiar problem (in addition to that of wanting to follow the crowd). Thinking about the nature of this problem will shed light on why Kierkegaard thinks he must use indirect communication to address his audience.<sup>25</sup>

The standard way to describe the problem plaguing Kierkegaard's target audience is to refer to his assertion that it suffers from "a monstrous illusion [*uhyre Sandsebedrag*]" (PV, 41).<sup>26</sup> The illusion is that Denmark is a Christian nation, a country in which "all are Christians." To say that the members of the audience suffer from the illusion is to say that they buy into this falsehood. They consider themselves and each other Christians when in fact they are not. Kierkegaard calls this unfortunate state-of-affairs "Christendom" (PV, 41-44).

It is tempting to think that the problem here is one of ordinary

<sup>25</sup>In this section, I explain why Kierkegaard thinks his audience suffers from self-deception. In the following section, I explain why he thinks addressing self-deception requires the use of indirect communication. The details in each case have to do with Christianity. However, nothing hangs on these details. Kierkegaard's argument as to why addressing self-deception requires the use of indirect communication would apply to any case of self-deception. Those not interested in Christianity can substitute a case that suits their purposes.

<sup>26</sup>See also PV, 23, 48, 88; OMWA, 8n\*\*. For other discussions of the illusion plaguing Kierkegaard's audience, see O. K. Bouwsma, "Notes on Kierkegaard's 'the Monstrous Illusion'," in *Without Proof or Evidence*, ed. J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Huswit (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 73-86; James Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Works as Authors" in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 272-81; Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, 70-71; and D. Z. Phillips, "Authorship and Authenticity: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein" in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) 210-12.

ignorance. The relevant story might run as follows. Kierkegaard's audience never learned and thus does not know what it really takes to be a Christian. It operates under some well-meaning but ultimately erroneous standard. According to this erroneous standard, everyone *does* qualify as a Christian; the appearance that all are Christians is *not* misleading but an accurate reflection of the truth. Thus the members of Kierkegaard's audience fall prey to the illusion simply because they do not know any better.

Kierkegaard does not accept this story. He does not believe that his audience suffers from ordinary ignorance. As he sees it, the facts of the matter are clear and no honest person could entertain the idea that all are Christians. He says:

Everyone who in earnest and also with some clarity of vision considers what is called Christendom, or the condition in a so-called Christian country, must without any doubt immediately have serious misgivings. What does it mean, after all, that these thousands and thousands as a matter of course call themselves Christians! These many, many people, of whom by far the great majority, according to everything that can be discerned, have their lives in entirely different categories, something one can ascertain by the simplest observation! People who perhaps never once go to church, never think about God, never name his name except when they curse! People to whom it has never occurred that their lives should have some duty to God. . . .

That there must be an enormous underlying confusion here, a dreadful illusion [*frygteligt Sandsebedrag*], of that there can surely be no doubt. (PV, 41)

Thus Kierkegaard thinks that the members of his audience *know better* than to do what they are doing. They know they should not call their way of living "Christianity," but they do so anyway.

We can elaborate on what it means to say Kierkegaard's audience "knows better" by picking up on a distinction Climacus draws in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The distinction concerns the difference between "abstract Sunday-understanding" and the concrete understanding of the rest of the week (CUP, 1:469). On Sundays, when they listen to the pastor preach, the Danish citizens grasp the concept of Christianity accurately. They realize that it picks out a set of strenuous behaviors. In particular, they understand that living a Christian life involves denying oneself, loving one's neighbor, following the paradigm of Christ, etc. On the other six days of the week, however, they fail to engage in these behaviors. They do not

practice self-denial; they do not love their neighbors; and they do not follow the paradigm of Christ. *Yet they still call themselves Christians.* They thereby betray that they understand the concept of Christianity differently during the week than they did on Sunday. It no longer picks out a set of strenuous behaviors. It picks out something more trivial—like being a citizen of Denmark or having a baptismal certificate at home in a drawer (CUP, 1:367). In sum, when Kierkegaard's fellow Danes use the concept of Christianity during the week, they water down its meaning. However, given their acquaintance with the proper meaning of the concept, this use or rather *misuse* of the concept cannot qualify as an honest mistake. It cannot be the result of simple ignorance. They *know better* than to talk this way.<sup>27</sup>

Examples of this phenomenon abound in Kierkegaard's writings. A particularly illuminating one arises in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Here Climacus describes a Sunday sermon on the Christian principle that "a man is capable of nothing" (CUP, 1:467).

<sup>27</sup>A tangential question arises here concerning what really makes Climacus upset. On the one hand, it might be that Climacus objects to what he sees as the *improper* use of Christian language during the week. He might believe there is some objectively correct way to use Christian language that people learn about on Sundays yet fail to employ during the week. On the other hand, it might be that Climacus simply dislikes the inconsistency between the Sunday understanding of Christianity and the weekday understanding. On this reading, Climacus would be perfectly happy if people embraced the weekday understanding—if only they would openly reject the Sunday understanding. James Conant embraces the latter option. He claims that "Kierkegaard would have no dispute at all with someone *who actually thinks* one can be a Christian simply by being a citizen" ("Putting Two and Two Together," 274). Admittedly, Climacus sometimes talks this way: "But one of the two must be a jest: either what the pastor says is a jest, a kind of parlor game one plays at times and bears in mind that a human being is capable of nothing, or the pastor must indeed be right when he says that a person must always bear this in mind—and the rest of us, the pastor, and I, too, are wrong in that we exegete the word 'always' so poorly" (CUP, 1:470-71). However, I think the former option outlined above is the better one. I think Climacus believes there *is* an objectively correct way to use Christian language. Evidence for this position comes from the passages where he accuses people of turning Christianity into something it is not (CUP, 1:369-81). It would be impossible to turn Christianity into something it was not if there were no objective truth regarding what Christianity is. Thus, passages such as the one just quoted should not be read straightforwardly but rather as a kind of rhetorical posturing.

The idea here is not that the powers and abilities human beings appear to have are illusory. It is rather that such things are not of their own making. Whatever powers and abilities they possess come from God. (We can think of this as an instance of the general principle set forth in the Epistle of James: “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.”<sup>28</sup>) The existential upshot of this idea is that people ought not to think highly of themselves or to become self-important because they have certain abilities. They should humbly acknowledge that in and of themselves they can do nothing; they need God’s help to do even the least thing. In this respect, they are no better than anyone else (CUP, 1:467).<sup>29</sup>

Climacus says that the sermon was easy to understand and that everyone grasped exactly what the pastor meant (CUP, 1:467). Still, he decides to send a spy out among the people to discover how they interpret the message during the rest of the week. After numerous run-ins, the spy reports his findings:

And so it goes, for six days of the week we are all capable of something. The king is capable of more than the prime minister. The witty journalist says: I will show so-and-so what I am capable of doing—namely, make him look ridiculous. The policeman says to the man dressed in a jacket: You very likely do not know what I am capable of doing—namely arrest him. The cook says to the poor woman who comes on Saturdays: You apparently have forgotten what I am capable of doing—namely, of prevailing upon the master and mistress so that the poor woman no longer receives the leftovers of the week. We are all capable of something, and the king smiles at the prime minister’s capability, and the prime minister laughs at the journalist’s, and the journalist at the policeman’s, and the policeman at the blue collar worker’s, and the blue collar worker at the Saturday-woman’s—and on Sunday we all go to church (except the cook, who never has time, because on Sunday there is always a dinner party at the councilor’s house) and hear the pastor declare that a human being is capable of nothing at all—that is, if by good fortune, we have not gone to a speculative pastor’s church.

But wait a minute. We have entered the church; with the help of a very capable sexton (for the sexton is especially capable on Sundays and with a silent glance indicates to so-and-so what he is capable of doing), each of us takes a place in relation to one’s specific capability in society.

<sup>28</sup>James 1:17 (King James Version).

<sup>29</sup>Kierkegaard discusses this principle at some length in his signed discourses. See EUD, 321-26; CD, 298-300.

Then the pastor enters the pulpit—but at the last moment there is a very capable man who has come late, and the sexton must demonstrate his capability. Then the pastor begins, and now all of us, from our respective different seats and points of view, understand what the pastor is saying from his elevated standpoint: that a human being is capable of nothing at all.  
(CUP, 1:470)

Here we have an example of what it means to say that the members of Kierkegaard's audience "know better." On the one hand, they *do* understand Christianity. For on Sunday they hear, understand, and acknowledge the truth that they cannot do anything without God's help. On the other hand, they act as if they *do not* understand Christianity. For during the rest of the week they take every opportunity to ascribe power first and foremost to themselves and to become self-important—yet still call themselves Christians.

At this point, an interesting set of questions arises. Why does this inconsistency persist? Why do people continue to misuse Christian language if they know better? Why do people continue to claim "all are Christians" if they can "ascertain by the simplest observation" that no one lives Christianly?

The striking answer is that people *want* to misuse language in this way; they *want* the illusion to remain in place. Thus Kierkegaard says the delusion [*Indbildning*] exists because the people are deluding themselves [*indbilder sig*] (OMWA, 8n\*\*). In other words, the illusion [*Sandsebedrag*] is actually a case of self-deception [*Selvbedrag*].<sup>30</sup>

Admittedly, Kierkegaard often accuses the pastors of encouraging the illusion (JP, 3:3620; TM, 136). But the people are not any less blameworthy as a result. For the pastors are simply giving them what they want (CUP, 1:478). And, as Kierkegaard starkly puts it in *Judge for Yourself!*, the people want to be deceived:

Yes, it is true that people will very readily blame the proclaimers of Christianity and seek the fault in them (and this may well be the way to

---

<sup>30</sup>Although there is a slight difference in meaning, Kierkegaard tends to use the words "illusion [*Sandsebedrag*]" and "delusion [*Indbildning*]" interchangeably. Evidence for this claim comes from the following passage in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*: "On the assumption that Christendom is an enormous illusion [*Sandsebedrag*], that it is a delusion [*Indbildning*] on the part of the multitude who call themselves Christians, in all probability the illusion [*Sandsebedrag*] we are discussing here is very common" (PV, 48).

become the Christian public's favorite); but it is perhaps rather the Christian public, which because of the fear of men (to which the proclaimers certainly should not yield) forces the proclaimers to deceive this Christian public. . . . The world *wants* to be deceived; not only is it deceived – ah, then the matter would not be so dangerous! – but it *wants* to be deceived. Intensely, more intensely, more passionately perhaps than any witness to the truth has fought for the truth, the world fights to be deceived; it most gratefully rewards with applause, money, and prestige anyone who complies with its wish to be deceived.

(JFY, 139-40; see also TM, 45; CD, 170-71)

Here we can see the truth of our initial suggestion that the problem is not one of ordinary ignorance. It is rather one of willed ignorance. The people do not want to overcome their confusion, their inconsistency, and their misuse of language. They want to maintain a lack of clarity about themselves and their lives (CD, 181).

Of course, this conclusion begs another set of questions: Why do the members of Kierkegaard's audience want to misuse language? Why do they want the illusion to remain in place? Why do they want to be deceived?

Kierkegaard answers these questions obliquely in part three of *Christian Discourses* (CD, 163-87). He says that people want to be deceived because owning up to the truth would force them to make a decision they desperately want to avoid. If they owned up to the truth, *either* they would have to stop calling themselves Christians *or* they would have to change how they live their lives. But they do not want to do either of these two things. On the one hand, they want the psychological benefits of calling themselves Christians. They want to be able to say of themselves and their loved ones that they are doing what, as far as they are concerned in a Christian nation and a Christian era, is the highest thing a human being can do. On the other hand, they want to enjoy comfortable, easygoing, cozy, aesthetic lives (cf. CUP, 1:85). They do not want to engage in the constant struggle and strain of the Christian life with its demand of self-denial and its promise of suffering (CD, 171, 179). Thus, we can see how Kierkegaard's audience is well-motivated to cover up the distinction between the Christian-religious mode of existence and the aesthetic mode of existence – a distinction that, in some sense, they already recognize.

### *Indirect Communication and the Monstrous Illusion*

Armed with this understanding of the problem plaguing Kierkegaard's audience, we can now investigate the claims he makes about how to accommodate it. The thrust of these claims comes out clearly in the following passage: "An illusion can never be removed directly, and basically only indirectly [*kun grundigt indirekte*]. If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly" (PV, 43). We find a similar message a few lines later:

On the assumption, then, that a religious author has from the ground up become aware of this illusion, Christendom, and to the limit of his ability with, note well, the help of God, wants to stamp it out [*vil det tillivs*]—what is he to do then? Well, first and foremost, no impatience. If he becomes impatient, then he makes a direct assault and accomplishes—nothing. By a direct attack he only strengthens a person in the illusion and also infuriates him. (PV, 43; cf. PV, 53)

To summarize these two passages, we can say that Kierkegaard believes indirect communication is indispensable for the task of removing an illusion.<sup>31</sup> That is, he believes only indirect and not direct communication can stamp it out.

To see why Kierkegaard's position might make sense, we need to understand what he means by a "direct" approach. Although he does not explicitly say so, we are led to believe he means "direct" in the sense of blunt talk and straight shooting, i.e. in the sense of avoiding deceptive, ironic, and otherwise elusive speech. Thus someone who approached the illusion directly would, for example, tell the Danish people that (1) there is a distinction between the Christian-religious mode of existence and the aesthetic mode of existence, (2) they have intentionally confused the two, and (3) they lie to themselves when they profess to be Christians.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup>For others who pick up on this claim, see Emmanuel, "Reading Kierkegaard," 242; Jansen, "Deception in Service of the Truth," 120, 124; Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 20-21; and Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2007) 40-41.

<sup>32</sup>I do not pretend that this example captures the *only* way to engage in direct communication in this context. However, I do maintain that anything that warrants the label "direct communication" here will bear some kind of family resemblance

In an important passage from *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard describes what will happen to someone who engages in such a direct communication:

Every once in a while a religious enthusiast appears. He makes an assault on Christendom; he makes a big noise, denounces nearly all as not being Christians—and he accomplishes nothing. . . . First and foremost, [the people] pay no attention to him at all, do not read his book but promptly lay it *ad acta* [aside]; or if he makes use of the Living Word, they go around on another street and do not listen to him at all. Then by means of a definition they smuggle him outside and settle down quite securely in their illusion. They make him out to be a fanatic and his Christianity to be an exaggeration—in the end he becomes the only one, or one of the few, who is not a Christian in earnest (since exaggeration, after all, is a lack of earnestness); the others are all earnest Christians. (PV, 42-43)

Why does Kierkegaard think things will turn out this way? Given what we now know, the answer is not hard to come by. The religious enthusiast (the direct communicator) and the target audience are at cross-purposes. In particular, the audience wants to obfuscate or conceal what the direct communicator wants to bring to light, viz. the difference between the Christian-religious mode of existence (which the audience says it chooses) and the aesthetic mode of existence (which it actually chooses). Consequently, if the direct communicator comes right out and announces the agenda, the audience will work against him or her. It will see the direct communicator coming and arm its defenses appropriately.

Notice that the opposition between the direct communicator and the target audience does not result from a factual or theoretical disagreement. In some sense, the audience knows and accepts what the direct communicator has to say about the difference between the aesthetic and Christian-religious modes of existence. It understands that Christianity involves more than being a citizen or having a baptismal certificate at home in a drawer. The opposition between the two parties arises at the next point, the point of determining what to do about these facts. The direct communicator wants to bring them to light and the audience wants to cover them up. Thus, Kierkegaard says that what the members of his audience really want to avoid is a showdown, i.e. a situation in which they would have to take the

to the example I provide.



speaker seriously (JP, 1:516). For if they had to take the speaker seriously, they would have to admit to themselves and each other that the speaker was right, which is the last thing they want to do.

Granting that the direct approach faces these obstacles, what is the alternative approach that allows us to avoid them? That is to say, what does the indirect approach look like? Curiously enough, Kierkegaard tells us that the indirect approach to removing an illusion [*Indbildning* or *Sandsebedrag*] involves the use of deception [*Bedrag*]: “One can deceive a person out of what is true, and—to recall old Socrates—one can deceive a person into what is true. Yes, in only this way can a deluded person [*et Menneske, der er i en Indbildning*] actually be brought into what is true—by deceiving him [*at bedrage ham*]” (PV, 53). The purpose of the deception is to prevent the deluded audience from realizing what the communicator has up his or her sleeve. The hope is that the communicator will thereby avoid setting off the audience’s defense mechanisms and hence gain the opportunity to make the audience aware of what it does not want to be made aware of (PV, 44, 54).

In order to make sense of what Kierkegaard is saying here, it is crucial to recognize that he is only speaking about one small part of a larger story. The project of making the audience aware of the truth about the aesthetic and religious ways of life is a complex one. It requires providing the audience with a new and more accurate vision of these alternatives, one more attuned to their subtle and often hidden drawbacks and advantages. Among other things this will involve helping the audience come to see in a more profound way how the aesthetic life suffers from despair and how the religious life offers an important but difficult way out. None of these things can be done quickly or easily. However, the first step in the process is to capture the audience’s attention. It is for this step that a deception is necessary.

Now Kierkegaard recommends that the deception follow what we might crudely call a “bait and switch” pattern. The teacher should not begin by talking about what he or she ultimately wants to talk about (PV, 54). As noted, such an approach would repel the audience. Instead, the teacher should begin by talking about what would interest the audience. The idea here is for the teacher to “make a big splash” with the members of the audience or to establish a rapport with them (PV, 44, 54). Then, once the audience’s

attention has been captured, the teacher is to switch over to what he or she ultimately wants to talk about. The hope is that the teacher will thereby force the audience to see what it does not want to see (PV, 44, 54).

We can fill out our understanding of Kierkegaard's notion of a "bait and switch" deception by exploring three concrete examples. Perhaps the most important one comes from Kierkegaard's own early (pre-1847) authorship.<sup>33</sup> Somewhat controversially,<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard asserts that he does not begin his early authorship by talking about what he ultimately wants to discuss, namely the essential character of the religious life (PV, 54). He attempts instead to establish a rapport with people by writing in a way they will find interesting (PV, 44). Having thereby gained the attention of his target audience, he makes the switch. The result is that "the religious is introduced so quickly that those who, moved by the esthetic, decide to follow along are suddenly standing right in the middle of the decisive qualifications of the essentially Christian" (OMWA, 7n\*).

The precise details of how Kierkegaard carries out the bait-and-switch deception in his early authorship are unclear. One hypothesis is that *Either/Or* is the bait. The switch to the religious then occurs in the *Two Upbuilding Discourses*, which are published three months later. Support for this theory comes from an anecdote in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*. The anecdote concerns an acquaintance who, presumably after reading *Either/Or*, came to believe that Kierkegaard was witty and clever. Hoping for more of the same, the acquaintance bought the *Two Upbuilding Discourses*. However, he encountered something quite unexpected: the religious (PV, 36; cf. OMWA, 9).

<sup>33</sup>See Jansen, "Deception in Service of the Truth," 121-22, 125.

<sup>34</sup>Many commentators have objected that the account Kierkegaard provides in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* and *On My Work as an Author* is an exercise in revisionist history. See, e.g., Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard, The Myths, and Their Origins*, trans. George C. Schoolfield (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1980) 1-31; Joakim Garff, "The Eyes of Argus: The Point of View and Points of View with Respect to Kierkegaard's 'Activity as an Author,'" *Kierkegaardiana* 15 (1991): 29-54. However, even if Kierkegaard's account is outright fiction, the story he tells still serves as an example of how he understands indirect communication. Therefore, for our purposes, the worries about historical accuracy are irrelevant.

The problem with this first hypothesis is that it presumes people saw through the pseudonymity of *Either/Or*. It presumes they recognized Kierkegaard was responsible for this book. Yet such recognition is precisely what Kierkegaard worked so very hard to prevent (see, e.g., PV, 60-62). We thus get the strange picture that he needed readers to think he wrote *Either/Or* in order to carry out the deception but tried to thwart them from doing so.<sup>35</sup>

In order to avoid this absurdity, I favor a different hypothesis. The bait and switch takes place entirely within *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard lures people in with the first volume and, in particular, with the spectacular "Seducer's Diary." He then makes the switch to the religious in the "Ultimatum" at the end of the second volume, which speaks about the "uplifting" idea that "in relation to God we are always in the wrong" (EO, 2:339).<sup>36</sup>

A second example of the kind of bait-and-switch deception under discussion occurs in *Philosophical Fragments* (CUP, 1:274n\*).<sup>37</sup> Here Climacus tries to attract the attention of the Danish Hegelians by pretending to engage in a bit of speculative philosophy. His ruminations focus on the learner's paradox found in the *Meno*. He first examines the solution to the paradox provided by the Socratic theory of recollection. He then imagines an alternative solution that "goes further" than the Socratic position – something the Hegelians were wont to do (PF, 20, 24). Quite stunningly, the new hypothesis turns out to look just like orthodox Christianity – so much so that he even imagines someone accusing him of plagiarism (PF, 35). Thus what started out as a bit of novel theorizing ends up as one more reading of "the old familiar text handed down from the fathers" (CUP,

---

<sup>35</sup>Thanks to Paul Vincent Spade for drawing this problem to my attention.

<sup>36</sup>See Robert L. Perkins, "Either/Or/Or: Giving the Parson His Due" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, Part II* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995) 207-31; and David R. Law, "The Place, Role, and Function of the 'Ultimatum' of *Either/Or*, Part Two, in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, Part II* ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995) 233-57.

<sup>37</sup>See Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 21-22; Paul Muench, "The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Johannes Climacus: Indirect Communication and the Art of 'Taking Away'" in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s): Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*, ed. Poul Houe and Gordon D. Marino (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 2003) 139-50.

1:[629-630]; WA, 165). Climacus has baited his audience by pretending to talk about things that interest them, only to switch in the end to talking about what interests him.

One final example that deserves mention is the parable the prophet Nathan tells King David in 2 Samuel 11:2–12:15.<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard discusses this passage at some length in *For Self-Examination*, where, following his customary practice, he retells the story for his own purposes (FSE, 37-39). We can summarize his rendition as follows. The narrative begins with King David's committing adultery with Bathsheba and subsequently having her husband murdered. Nathan learns of David's misdeeds and desires to get the unrepentant king to acknowledge the error of his ways. But Nathan does not proceed straightforwardly. Instead, he approaches David with a little story he has written so that the king, "a connoisseur, an expert in matters of taste," can judge it:

"There lived two men in a certain city. The one was very rich and had great herds of livestock, large and small, but the poor man had only a little lamb that he had bought and raised and that had grown up with him together with his children. It ate from his hand and drank from his cup, and it was like a child in his home. But when a traveler came to the rich man, he spared his livestock, large and small, and took the poor man's sheep, slaughtered it, and prepared it for the stranger who had come to him."  
(FSE, 38)

David listens to the story and makes some comments about its structure and style. Then, suddenly, with David still caught up in the aesthetic aspects of the story, Nathan changes his tone: "Thou art the man." The transition has its desired effect; David sees the error of his ways and repents (cf. CD, 235-36).

### *Conclusion Regarding the Indispensability Thesis*

We can now take stock of this second argument for the indispensability thesis. We have established two things. First, the use of direct communication to help people out of self-deception faces a serious obstacle. Second, indirect communication provides a way around this obstacle. That is not to say indirection is infallible, nor

<sup>38</sup>See Pattison, "The Theory and Practice of Language and Communication," 86-87.

does Kierkegaard suggest as much (PV, 49). The point is just that indirect communication can avoid a serious difficulty that plagues direct communication.

Are these two points strong enough to support Kierkegaard's indispensability thesis? To recall, the indispensability thesis states that indirect communication can accomplish some task that direct communication simply cannot. For this thesis to hold, direct communication must *necessarily* or *inevitably* fail at the task in question. To wit, it must necessarily or inevitably fail at removing self-deception. We have seen that Kierkegaard makes a claim to this effect (PV, 43). But does the evidence at hand support it? I believe it does not. Let me explain why.

Kierkegaard's account reveals that the obstacle facing direct communication stems from a conflict of desires. The audience wants the opposite of what the direct communicator wants. In particular, it wants to obscure the truth that the direct communicator wants to bring to light. But why should we believe that the audience will necessarily or inevitably win this conflict? Why should we believe that, just because the audience *wants* the direct communicator to fail, he or she will fail? For all we know there are cases where, perhaps simply out of dogged perseverance, the direct communicator succeeds at making the audience aware of the truth even though the audience does not want to be made aware of it. Of course, it might turn out that there are no such cases. It might turn out that, just as a matter of brute fact, the audience always triumphs. But that is not something Kierkegaard or anyone else can establish a priori.

Now we do have a posteriori evidence that speaks against the efficacy of direct communication when it comes to removing self-deception. History furnishes us with no shortage of examples here. However, even if we were to discover that *every* previous attempt at direct communication had failed at this task, we still would not have a strong enough case for the indispensability thesis. We still could not rule out the possibility that these failures occurred because the direct communicator gave up too soon. Moreover, we could not rule out the possibility that the tide would turn in favor of direct communication in the future. As long as these possibilities remain in play, we strictly speaking cannot conclude that the failure of direct communication is necessary or inevitable.

In conclusion, the considerations explored in the second half of

this paper do not support the indispensability thesis. Still we must take care lest we overstate the point. Two qualifications are worth mentioning in particular. First, our investigation has not shown that the indispensability thesis is false, only that the specific reasons Kierkegaard offers us in the *Point of View* do not establish its truth. The possibility of proving the thesis on other grounds remains open. Second, the results of our investigation do not entail that indirect communication is *useless*. On the contrary, we have seen that indirect communication is a very fruitful strategy for removing self-deception. Indeed it is far superior to the direct approach. The problem is just that the indispensability thesis sets a higher bar. It states that indirect communication provides the *only* way to accomplish some task, not just the *best* way to do so. Nothing we have examined in this paper supports a claim quite this strong.